AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WINFIELD DUNN ADMINISTRATION

INTERVIEW WITH

W. F. CHILDRESS

BY - CHARLES W. CRAWFORD

TRANSCRIBER - BETTY WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

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Childress, W F.

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PLACE Knoxville, TN.

DATE July 9, 1976

W. F. Childress
(Interviewee)

Charles W. Crawford
(For the Mississippi Valley Archives of the John Willard Brister Library of Memphis State University)

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THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THIS PROJECT IS "AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WINFIELD DUNN ADMINISTRATION". THE DATE IS JULY 9, 1976. THE PLACE IS KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MR. W. F. CHILDRESS, EDITOR OF THE KNOXVILLE JOURNAL. THE INTERVIEW IS BY DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE MEMPHIS STATE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE. TRANSCRIBED BY BETTY WILLIAMS. INTERVIEW #I.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Childress, I suggest we start by getting some basic background information about you and then we'll get into your first contact with Winfield Dunn and the campaign as you saw it develop.

MR. CHILDRESS: Okay, Dr. Crawford, I became editor of the Knoxville Journal in 1968. Prior to that time I had been the associate editor of the Beckley, West Virginia Post Herald which was the only Republican paper in southern West Virginia. Prior to that time I had been Sunday editor of the Kingsport Times News--about a four year period. I am a journalism graduate of the University of Tennessee, after having attended Yale University and East Tennessee State University. I am an Air Force veteran, commercial pilot.

I am married to an active Republican politician, have two children. My interest in politics stems not only from my editorship, but from a fairly long involvement stemming back to the age of 12 in Republican campaigns. As I recall in my home area of southern West Virginia, of which the total Republican membership at one time was about 3 dozen people, I

had the unique experience of helping campaign for a Republican who was seeking a seat on the county school board. And oddly enough he won. What I contributed to that was small, but it did stimulate an interest in at least observing Republican campaigns. I've never seen one that quite followed the pattern of Winfield Dunn's. I had heard of him before through party circles, but my first meeting with Winfield was along in December of 1969 when he came by to make a courtesy call on myself and the late Charles Smith, who was a publisher of the Journal until his death about 2 1/2 years ago.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you remember who was with Winfield Dunn?

MR. CHILDRESS: He was by himself at the time. My initial impression was as I told Big Chub later, that this is the type of guy that you would hope could win but probably won't. He was very personable, and he gave the impression of being totally honest and candid and just a swell type guy. He also projected what later became more than obvious to all the observers and to the participants in the campaign that he was a person with tremendous charisma. He displayed the vital knack of any good politician and that is remembering people's names and remembering things about them. To my knowledge, in the early days, he had no one prompting him of these matters. It was purely a gift, I suppose.

We had a very interesting, general and forthright conversation with Winfield at the time and in which we discussed the general aspects of politics in East Tennessee. At the time it must be remembered although it is always sort of difficult to force a Republican to remember at this

point in time the possibility of electing a Republican governor in Tennessee was quite remote. I think that was even in the minds of us who would like to think that Republicans then and now have an equal standing in the state, but it was considered quite remote among the harsh realists among us.

Again, the image projected by Winfield at the time was quite stimulating. What most of us at the time had foremost on our minds was beating Albert Gore. Bill Brock, at that point in time, was unquestionably the candidate. The whole matter of the governor's race was sort of on the back shelf for the most part. This was in late '69 and early '70. Things began to pick up generally in both the U.S. senatoral race and the governor's race early in 1970. By the next time I ran into Winfield, which was prior to the Lincoln Day dinner on Feb. 12, 1970, things had begun to move quite a bit. And there were already surfacing what later became very enthusiastic response to the Republican campaign, among Republicans, disenchanted Democrats and others who had had no previous political affiliation.

I happened to be at the time with a fellow by the name of Bill Redding who was quite active in Brock's campaign. Typical of many of those who became active, Bill had been a Republican, been active on precinct committees in young Republicans Club and so forth, but he hadn't before been identified with any particular candidate or campaign. We were going through the lobby of the Andrew Johnson Hotel when it was still in operation and Winfield came through with a bag in his hand

which he explained was a prescription for Betty who had come down with a cold on the way up to the Lincoln Day dinner. This was the morning, I think, before the Lincoln Day dinner.

I introduced Bill to Winfield. His reaction was pretty much what later became standard of those who first met Winfield. He said, "Gee, this guy comes on like gangbusters!" I am sure what was going on in his mind at the time was what also occurred to others in the Brock campaign that Winfield would be about the best person to be running mate, so to speak, with Bill Brock. Because their interest, quite frankly, was not necessarily that we have a gubernatorial candidate who would win, but one who would not do any harm to Bill Brock's candidacy. And they saw in Winfield Dunn those qualities. At the very least, he would thoroughly complement Bill Brock's campaign with his charisma and attractiveness and all might possibly win the governor's race.

This later manifested itself in the tremendous grass-roots organizing that was done among volunteer workers, both in the primary and intensively so after the primary. These [are] things we saw developing. Of course, locally we had sort of a favorite son candidate in Claude Robertson. And it produced some complexity in the race with him teaming up with Tex Ritter to run against Bill Brock. That proved to be not only Claude's major gimmick but a fatal one in some ways in some areas. It alienated the Brock forces and there was some questions all along as to whether or not Claude--not from the standpoint of his ability or his image, but from the duty that he had chosen previously of being the state party chairman, of having to make the hard decisions and the hard moves that all party chairmen had

to make--whether or not he'd alienated party faithful across the state to the extent that he might have a burden that was too great for any candidate to have and win.

But the thing that seemed to be happening, and almost without awareness, was another organization developed--one quite apart from the established precinct committees and their related party organizations. It was one also apart from the other large group of Republicans volunteer and professional workers which was the Brock group. It seemed to center on the areas and precincts that had gone heavily for Goldwater in the '64 presidential campaign. Whether that was by design or accident, I do not know. Or whether it merely was pure coincidence, but it did seem to be close parallel throughout East Tennessee that the more conservative Republican areas were those in which the initial pockets of Dunn support developed.

For instance, in the western part of Knox County, one of the Dunn strongholds originally--and from his initial contacts with old friends, former colleagues in medical school, even those he had an acquaintance with in social circles through one reason or another--there developed ties with persons who had been active in the party structure. One was E.S. Bevins, Jr., whose father had been secretary of the Knox County Republican Party for a number of years, secretary and treasurer, I think, and whose whole family had been quite active in Republican affairs. They were recognized leaders in the Concord area and as they still are.

The benefit that he got at this stage in the game from developing this type of volunteer core was something you couldn't buy with money and you couldn't invent if you tried to and that was the level of enthu-

siasm. Someone put it in the terms that these people were so inexperienced in political matters that they didn't know they couldn't win, so therefore, they won.

It was like other aspects of the campaign--any campaign. It was difficult to put your finger on who was doing how well at any stage of the thing. You had a sense of the flow of the campaign. And that sense was toward the last month or so before the primary the race was largely between Maxey Jarman and with Winfield Dunn running somewhere in the second position. How well Claude Robertson and the other candidates did would affect the outcome of course. But generally it was considered too that Claude Robertson his strength and his potential for getting votes sort of overlapped that of Maxey Jarman.

We as a paper were in a rather difficult position. We had not only the senatorial campaign which we had tremendous interest in because of our almost total disagreement of philosophy of Bill Brock. The Tex Ritter thing sort of messed it up and we too had a sense of responsibility to the party itself since now it is all of 138 years that the Knoxville Journal and its predecessor papers have been closely identified with the Republican Party. Although we had no official position as such [it is] considered the spokesman for the party and certainly a force to some extent in encouraging and advocating and what have you in the direction of the party in this part of the state.

My predecessor, Guy Lincoln Smith, was state party chairman a number of years. So it is a deeply rooted kind of thing. After quite a bit of agonizing, we, for purposes of hopefully fostering unity within the party

and creating a circumstance in which the divergent elements in the primary could get back together we (1) endorsed Bill Brock and (2) and for these reasons and because we had a personal sense of loyalty to Claude Robertson endorsed Claude in the gubernatorial primary. At the time we did it, especially in regard to Claude, we felt that (1) by endorsing the two main identifiable wings of the party in East Tennessee--Brock and Robertson--we were creating an atmosphere for unity. (2) We were well aware that Claude's chances were pretty slim. He didn't have anything that any of the other candidates had in their separate races. None of them had all of it, but each one had a piece here and there.

But we figured that if our endorsement did not contribute to Claude Robertson winning it would contribute to Dunn's winning by taking away from Maxey Jarman's strength.

DR. CRAWFORD: Which is mainly in Middle Tennessee.

MR. CHILDRESS: Well, which was mainly in Middle Tennessee, but if he got an edge to win, it would have to come out of East Tennessee. So that was our awareness, and I think, perhaps in a way it did contribute to Winfield's victory. It had one noticeable effect. We have to endure a lot of slings and arrows along the way, which we freely do, and sometimes enjoy doing, as any newspaper does, but it did contribute a bit to polarization within Knox County in particular and it outraged the original Dunn supporters and perhaps made them work a little harder. Some of them told me so later.

Among those who were Dunn supporters who were outraged and encouraged to work a little harder was none other than my own wife who from the

moment that I introduced her to Winfield and Betty--I think that was at the Lincoln Day dinner too--she was thoroughly captivated. And she had been involved in quite a number of political races, non-partisan and Republican before, but none with greater enthusiasm. When our home precinct went decidedly for Winfield in the primary she sort of gave me a hard time for months thereafter.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, really it was not too surprising, was it to other Republicans that you endorsed a hometown candidate?

MR. CHILDRESS: No, not at all. As a matter of fact, if we had endorsed anybody other than Claude we were convinced then and still convinced it would have been quite destructive to the party. Then taken from among the very close friends of the paper, so to speak, and the people who had been the backbone of the Republican Party, and I am sure perhaps even among Democrats and Independents it would have been an act of bad faith to endorse anyone else other than Claude.

Claude is just that type of person. He has been a friend and supporter of the paper and the previous editor and myself then and since. He is just a whale of a guy. We couldn't really have done anything else. I seriously question even how had we--the choice was really in our minds between Claude and Winfield.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you seriously think about supporting Bill Jenkins?

MR. CHILDRESS: Not seriously, no. I don't think we ever had

any thoughts about supporting anyone other than Claude or Winfield. Bill Jenkins--there is no real animosity toward Bill Jenkins--it is just a practical judgment, I suppose on our part. We thought that if Claude did not have a chance and there was serious question all along whether or not he had a chance to mobilize a statewide organization and then command the leaders needed on a statewide basis--if he couldn't do it, Bill Jenkins certainly couldn't for much the same reasons. Both had been in positions of leadership and responsibility on a statewide basis. Jenkins having been the Speaker of the House, he thereby incurred the same animosity and stepped on the same toes in many cases on a statewide basis. Claude, due to his relationship with the paper and his hometown favorite son aspect of it, was first choice but to consider the hardcore aspects of both electing a governor and again nominating someone who would not detract from the Bill Brock campaign. There you get into regionalism too. This was something that would just about stack the cards against Bill Jenkins. Baker being an East Tennessean, Brock being from East Tennessee, knowing that we had to have West Tennessee and hopefully Middle Tennessee support, we--meaning the Republican Party--to elect at least a senator and hopefully a govenor, this sort of ruled Bill Jenkins out.

Frankly, as far as electibility, he had more all along than Claude Robertson had if you eliminated the regionalism aspect. These were really the factors that went into the decision. The primary victory only ignited the fires that had not existed before in terms of support for Dunn. And it was just like pouring kerosene on the coals for those who had gotten

into the thing in the primary in which in most cases was their first and only political campaign. It was sort of like shooting for the moon on your first shot and getting there. I've never seen such an enthusiastic reaction to a primary victory. Again, it was a bunch of people who didn't know enough about it [to know] that they couldn't win. It was just that kind of atmosphere.

The characteristics that Winfield exhibited in the primary really came to the forefront and had tremendous impact in the campaign that I witnessed and was otherwise aware of during the general election. The knack for remembering people's names, the ability to recall little personal things --and he was a tremendous media candidate. This personal touch was something like [when] he shook a hand and called a person by their first name after having seen them only once before. You could almost witness the immediate--not only conversion, but dedication--among the people who had, in most cases, not been interested in politics before.

This resulted in my home precinct and many other precincts in Knox County and elsewhere across East Tennessee an almost incredible depth of grass-roots organization where we had not only precinct leaders, but it was down to block captains and in some cases it paired up where some people were chairmen of two or three houses. We approached it with an all-out registration drive with direct phone calls to at least three each to every voter in the precinct, [and] a follow-up contact with every voter in the precinct in person. It was just a tremendous organization. By the time that election day rolled around we had a card file on every voter in the precinct--their home phone number. We had sort of a ball-

room setup in my own home with about a half a dozen people manning the phones and a coordinator at the election site checking off people as they voted. And those who had not voted by 4 or 5 o'clock were--when they voted their card was pulled out--and by 4 or 5 o'clock the cards that were left people started calling them. Then about 5:30 or 6:00 the head of the election group in the precinct or chairman of the elections felt it was necessary to issue the message: "Hey, quit calling, we are voting more people than we have on the books, we think." As it turned out, we did vote about 95% of those registered at the time and 90% that voted, voted for Dunn and Brock.

DR. CRAWFORD: An unusually high percentage in Tennessee, you know.

MR. CHILDRESS: It was unusually high, but it resulted from a degree of organizing on a volunteer basis. To my knowledge, it had never been equaled before or probably will never be equaled again. It was a by-product of the tremendous charisma of Winfield Dunn and the enthusiasm which he was able to foster among those who came in contact with him.

The enthusiasm didn't exactly wane. Most of this group wound up at the inauguration later in Nashville and it was as much of a love feast as it was a political celebration.

DR. CRAWFORD: There were a lot of people there that night, I remember.

MR. CHILDRESS: Yes, It was quite a crowd. It was cold as the dickens. It was something to be remembered for

a long time.

DR. CRAWFORD: I know our time is running out, Mr. Childress. Do you have any other observations about why things turned out as they did?

MR. CHILDRESS: Well, the time was right and the mood of the people of Tennessee was right. It was also a time when the country was not quite in the situation that it got in later in terms of domestic unrest. It was also a time, when a heck of a lot of things, some of them which still exist, were compelling East Tennesseans in particular to want to see something different out of state government. One of the great deficiencies, of course, was our interstate system. There was a valid feeling that East Tennessee had been neglected. This, along with the spirit of the time, was all encompassing as far as we were concerned. The whole thing of the Republican Party having a chance to elect a governor was like the first time Pittsburgh won the World Series.

DR. CRAWFORD: You emphasized Winfield Dunn's positive accomplishments. How much do you think the Democratic candidate, John J. Hooker, had to do with the outcome?

MR. CHILDRESS: John J. gave editorial writers and cartoonists and others a heck of a lot of material to work with. Our own cartoonist had a ball with his silk stockings throwing out clothes left and right and saying, "Tish, don't I have some cotton socks somewhere?" This kind of thing. Hooker's business endeavors certainly raised questions about his ability to govern and raised clouds. This was another thing that helped Winfield Dunn and by him being a sort of

clean and unencumbered type of person with a professioanl background certainly was one that created a favorable image in most people's minds. And he didn't have the clouds of doubt about him that Hooker had. But it was really more of the personality kind of thing than the Republican and Democrat thing. I think Hooker did contribute through his liabilities. Whether Winfield would have fared better or worse with a different candidate say, a Buford Ellington, who was certainly not a charismatic figure --not like Hooker--and project anything like the same atmosphere that Hooker did, you could debate it from now on. I rather think that against say, an Ellington, Dunn would have done as well or better.

DR. CRAWFORD: Thank you, Mr. Childress.